

## **A BIG WRITING HANDOUT**

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The purpose of this handout is to assist you in written assignments, with the hope that you will emerge from the course with a better idea of what constitutes good academic writing. There are three related sections: first, a section on format to follow on assignments; second, some discussion of important problems and issues with written assignments, and third, a key to feedback that I will give you on assignments. Keep this handout so that you can use it while writing assignments and after they are returned.

### **I. GENERAL FORMAT GUIDELINES**

These are a few specific requirements that will apply to virtually any writing that you do for this class (I will let you know of any exceptions.)

#### Any written assignment

1. All written assignments that are to be turned in should have your name on the front page, as well as a clear indication of what the assignment is (e.g. the name or number of the assignment).
2. Double-space if you type, and use a 10 or 12 size font.

#### Assignments turned in electronically

The title of the file you send should include your name and, ideally, an indication of which assignment it is. Assignments usually will be submitted through Moodle.

#### Assignments that are printed out

Any assignment of more than one page should be stapled. Do not use a folder or binder. If there is more than one page, pages should be numbered.

#### Papers and major essays

1. Papers must have "normal" margins (about an inch).
2. Title pages are not required on all assignments, but they should be used on longer (10 pages or more) papers.
3. If the paper requires any out-of-class research (beyond assigned texts), you must include a bibliography (or "works consulted") which lists all sources used in writing the paper (not just works cited). See *St. Martin's Handbook* for correct form. Such a paper must also contain complete citations (of any standard form) within the text. (See Notes on Writing #1 below.) If it is not a research paper, but a source is directly quoted or referred to, you should still cite the source and page number of the quote. **BE SURE YOU USE CORRECT FORM FOR CITING FROM THE INTERNET AND FOR CITING WORKS FROM ANTHOLOGIES. SEE THE HANDBOOK FOR BOTH OF THESE.**
4. Quotations that run more than four lines should be set off from the text and indented five to ten spaces from both the right and the left margins. In this case, do not enclose the quotation in quotation marks.

## II. NOTES ON WRITING

Here are a few things to keep in mind when writing assignments. Some of them may be obvious to you, but remember: even good writers make mistakes. I would not list any of these problems if I had not encountered them often in college courses.

1. Plagiarism. Many students arrive at Berea with no clear understanding of what plagiarism is. Plagiarism is the use of others' ideas with making clear that you are doing so. If you plagiarize, you are implicitly stealing and lying, by implying that you have written something that you did not write.

Follow these rules to avoid plagiarism:

1. All direct quotes from other sources must be placed in quotes, and you must state the source and page number. For example, if the author is Smith, after discussing his idea write (Smith 23.) (But note that Internet sources usually lack page numbers.)

2. Any time you paraphrase, or discuss the basic ideas, or cite statistics from another source you must also state information on the source. Students commonly have problems with this. Many think that it is not necessary to cite the source if you paraphrase in your own words. **This is not true**; if you are stating someone else's ideas, they must be cited.

2. Originality. Even if you take care to cite your sources and do not plagiarize, it is not a good idea to quote too much. If most (or a very large portion) of your paper is quotes, then you are not saying much on your own; you are not showing your understanding of ideas. Use quotes only when the author states the idea in a way that you think is particularly useful, or when you want to show that the author really takes a certain view. It is usually better to write things in your own words, and that does not mean just repeating the author's sentences with a few words changed.

3. Paragraphs. Each paragraph should communicate a particular point, or a small set of related ideas. Paragraphs should be neither too short to do so (e.g., only a sentence or two long) nor so long that they meander over many topics. The more common problem is paragraphs that are too long. It is harder to read and follow such a paper. Good paragraph use helps clarify the organization of the paper.

4. Usually keep sentences short. If you write a very long sentence, with many clauses, a sentence that may seem very profound and wonderful to you, you may, despite your best intentions, confuse the reader and make it very difficult for him to follow your argument, even if the sentence is grammatically correct (which gets harder the longer your sentence is). The above sentence is 56 words long, and it is a bad sentence. Try to keep most of your sentences from getting anywhere near that long. A variety of sentence lengths and complexities can make for good style. Students who have trouble with sentence structure and clarity should err on the side of shorter sentences.

5. Similarly, do not use more words than you need to express an idea. Be concise, and you will usually express yourself more clearly, as well as keep people's attention better. For example:

"In my opinion, at that point in time, the situation was precarious and dangerous for all of those involved."

One could rewrite that sentence as "The situation was dangerous" and lose virtually none of the original meaning.

6. Do not use words if you do not know what they mean. This sounds obvious, but many people try to impress with big words, and all they do is confuse. There are no extra points for big words. As you master a greater vocabulary, you can use a wider variety of words for better style and more precise meaning, but clarity should always be your priority.

7. Watch your spelling. Everyone makes typos now and then (even professors do!), but a little use of computer spell-checkers, the dictionary, and proofreading goes a long way toward keeping you from looking excessively sloppy. I once read of Supreme Court justices overturning statutes (the writer meant statutes!). At the very least, do not misspell the central names and concepts of your paper. An example of this is a paper that I read in which the student referred repeatedly to a man named "Nikon," when he meant President Richard Nixon! This does not create a good impression.

Also watch for spell-check errors. Do not automatically change a misspelled word to the first suggestion from the spell-checkers. This error has led a whole generation of students to write papers with the word "defiantly" replacing "definitely." This is defiantly, I mean definitely, a mistake.

8. Edwin E. Newman, a writer on English, said that the apostrophe is a mystery to most Americans. Do not let it be a mystery to you. An apostrophe means possession; do not confuse it with plurals. For example:

*University* -- singular: means one university

*Universities* -- plural: means more than one university

*University's* -- singular possessive: means one university owns something, e.g., "University's property."

*Universities'* -- plural possessive: means more than one university owns something.

The only correct use of single apostrophes, rather than double, around a word or phrase is when quoting within a quotation.

9. Watch out for common usage errors. Know the difference between "their," "they're," and "there;" "two," "too," and "to;" "its" and "it's;" "affect" and "effect;" etc.

10. Avoid sentence fragments and run-on sentences. A sentence fragment is an incomplete sentence; it does not contain a correct noun and verb. Quite frequently, fragments are caused by students separating a dependent clause with a period instead of with a comma. For example, the sentence "When writing, be careful about fragments" starts with a dependent clause. It would turn into a sentence fragment and a sentence if a period replaced the comma. Sentence fragments are considered acceptable in some creative writing and advertising, but not in academic writing.

Independent clauses in one sentence (phrases which could stand alone as separate sentences) should be separated by a semi-colon or with a conjunction (and, or, but...) Separating them with just a comma is called a "run-on sentence, and it is incorrect. (The previous sentence without the "and" would have been an example.)

### III. KEY TO ESSAY FEEDBACK

As a way to help make my feedback on your written work clear and useful, I am providing you with the following "key" to use when looking at essays, papers, etc. that have been returned. Besides giving you guide to shorthand marks on your writing, I also have tried to briefly clarify my expectations on some writing issues. (Some of these were discussed in the previous sections of this handout.) Many (but not all) of these symbols or letters are consistent with standard revision symbols.

If you have many mechanical errors (spelling, grammar, etc.), I will only correct a minority of them, and leave it to you to find similar problems in the rest of your paper.

Highlighted or circled words usually are misspelled, or indicate incorrect punctuation.

A check mark indicates that you have made a good point or have satisfactorily completed part of the assignment.

? = Unclear or confusing point. I cannot follow your argument, or cannot understand what the sentence is saying.

1 W = Two words should be one word (e.g., "can not --> cannot")

2 W = One word should be two words (e.g., "alot --> a lot")

A = Agreement. This is a common grammar problem. Most commonly, people incorrectly use a singular pronoun with a plural, e.g., "A person should watch their grammar." "A person" is singular, so it does not agree with "their," which is plural. Either change to "people should watch their grammar," or "a person should watch his/her grammar. (Or one can mix "his" and "her" in one's writing. Just "his" is considered grammatically correct, but it is sexist.)

CAP = Capitalization. Remember to capitalize proper nouns, such as Congress, the Constitution, the Supreme Court, etc. (Not capitalizing these words is a frequent error in political science classes.)

Ordinarily, one does not capitalize nouns that refer to concepts, such as democracy. Note that "Democrat" and "Republican" are capitalized when they refer to persons affiliated with a party, but not when referring to philosophical positions.

CM = Citation missing or unclear. Be sure that your list of sources contains the source cited in your paper and that it is listed the same way (e.g., if it says Smith in the citation it should be in alphabetical order under Smith in your bibliography).

CON = Conclusion? What overall point are you making (or can you make)? Come to a conclusion on this.

DOC = Needs documentation. After a direct quotation or a fact or idea taken from another source, you must provide a citation of the source. (See "Notes on Writing" #1.)

EV = Evidence? Do you have any support for this idea, any evidence that it is true? This is a basic building block of good academic writing.

EX = Can you give an example? Examples are a good way to demonstrate your idea and your understanding of it.

EXP = Needs further explanation or elaboration.

FRAG = Sentence fragment. (See "Notes on Writing" #10.)

LQ = Long quotation: should be indented with no quotation marks (see the final point under "General Format Guidelines" above).

NO = Usually refers to a definite factual error.

P = Start new paragraph here. Remember to try to put separate ideas or points into separate paragraphs. (See "Notes on Writing" #3.)

PN = Pages should be numbered.

Q? = Is this a quote? Be sure to use your own words or cite quotations. (See "Notes on Writing" #1.)

RED = Redundant.

REF = Unclear reference; the subject is unclear. (E.g., the sentence says "it was successful," and the reader cannot tell what "it" is.)

REL = Not clear how this point is relevant to the rest of the essay.

SS = Sentence structure. Grammar is incorrect or technically correct but awkward and hard to follow.

ST = All printed essays of more than one page should be stapled.

T = Transition is weak. It is not clear how you got here from your previous passage; this section of your paper is not well connected to the rest of the essay.

U = Underline or italicize. Applies to titles of books and journals, as well as court cases.

V = Vague statement or idea.

VT = Verb tense is wrong; most commonly, tenses are not consistent (e.g., you switch back and forth from past to present).

WW = Wrong word. This word either makes no sense here or is not the best word to express your point.